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English IV

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Compare / Contrast of *Beowulf* & *Paradise Lost*

After reading, there are many ways in which the epic poems of *Beowulf* and *Paradise Lost* are similar; although, there are many differences in them as well. The *Beowulf* characters—Beowulf, Hrothgar, Grendel, and Grendel’s mother—can be compared and contrasted to the *Paradise Lost* characters—Satan, Beelzebub, Moloch, and others.

The author of *Paradise Lost*, John Milton, referred to both Christian and pagan sources while writing *Paradise Lost*; whereas Seamus Heaney, the author of *Beowulf,* also referred to both, but with different connections. *Beowulf* drew on pagan epic tradition for kings, heroes, and monsters while drawing on new Christian beliefs to present these characters as noble, in possession of the natural knowledge of God, willing to battle his enemies on earth, and therefore capable of redemption (Smith). Heaney was asked to blend the two ideologies in a complex yet effective plot that appealed to his audience precisely because they were attempting to reconcile their own beliefs (Smith). *Beowulf* was a pagan epic which expanded into a Christian one, while *Paradise Lost* was a Christian epic with pagan elements.

As Smith said in her research, parallels exist between the two poems—the corresponding hierarchical structure of king, hero, and evil. Also, she said they both drew from similar sources, specifically the Bible and apocryphal texts, in an effort to illustrate the continuing presence of evil in this world since mankind’s Fall. To point out the king/hero/evil in the poems…in *Paradise Lost*, it is represented by God, Christ, and Satan, and in *Beowulf,* it is represented by Hrothgar, Beowulf, and the three monsters. God and Hrothgar are kings who call upon their heroes to defeat the evil that threatens to destroy the paradise each has created (Smith).

A comparison, as well as a distinction, of the two poems would be the two heroes of Christ and Beowulf. They both served their purpose as heroes and helped their people, but Christ created a new world in *Paradise Lost*, whereas Beowulf killed creatures that arose in *Beowulf*.

Satan can be compared to Grendel, Beowulf’s first encounter. Both of these evils are motivated by their hatred for the king figures. They seek release from their jealousy and rage in destruction. Thus, they act similarly shrouded by mist and darkness (Smith). Also, the two evil’s lairs are similar because they are away from the rest of society and are not well-kept in any means. Their evilness lies with them driven by their inner anguish. As Satan said in *Paradise Lost,* “Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell.” You could even throw Macbeth in with Satan and Grendel because he is the hated person, or evil, in *Macbeth.*

In both Beowulf and Christ’s first encounters, the two heroes do not use any weapons to defeat their enemies. While Christ has only one Satan to battle at different times, Beowulf encounters three different versions of evil. In his second encounter, he must fight Grendel’s mother who avenges her son’s death by reclaiming his arm and killing one of Hrothgar’s men (Smith). After he defeats her, Beowulf is given a hero’s welcome by King Hrothgar.

There is no other way to explain this better than Jennifer Smith has:

Finally, both heroes will face evil in a final confrontation and will face evil’s draconic incarnation. In *Paradise Lost* it is the Dragon of the Apocalypse, and in *Beowulf* it is a dragon that “midnight air, breathing out flames” is made to fall by Beowulf in much the same way that Satan is made to fall by Christ. Beowulf makes the ultimate heroic sacrifice in giving his life to slay the dragon and save his people; this, of course, alludes to Christ’s crucifixion for mankind’s redemption.

*Beowulf* and *Paradise Lost* can be compared in many contexts—characters, plots, etc.—because they all base the next poem off of the last, slightly changing it. It is remarkable how this is allowed to happen as it must be some form of plagiarism, but evidentially, these poems all become classics, or “epics,” of their own nature.

Works Cited

Smith, Jennifer. "Paradise Lost and Beowulf: The Christian/Pagan Hybrids of the Epic Tradition." *California State University, Long Beach*. 15 Feb. 2001. Web. 31 Mar. 2011.